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June 6, 2003

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WASHINGTON - In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urged the U.S. government to launch a major international initiative to expose and raise awareness of human rights abuses and humanitarian conditions in North Korea, including expanded U.S. government reporting, congressional engagement, and multilateral diplomacy. The USCIRF also called on Congress to expand its funding for organizations advocating the protection of human rights in North Korea and activities that raise the awareness of human rights conditions in that country.

USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer said, "North Korea is a humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions. As awful as the physical toll has been, the deprivation of the human spirit must be even greater." Religious adherents are relegated to a low category in society, receiving fewer privileges and opportunities, such as education and employment, and denied food aid. Religious prisoners are subject to constant abuse from prison officials in an effort to force them to renounce their faith. When they refuse, these prisoners are often beaten and sometimes tortured to death.

The Commission made the following additional recommendations:

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The U.S. government should urge China, Russia, and other members of the international community to grant refugee status to North Koreans.

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The U.S. government should urge the Chinese government to allow South Koreans and international NGOs greater access to northern China and greater capacity to serve the needs of North Korean refugees.

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In any discussions regarding humanitarian assistance, the U.S. government should urge the North Korean government to allow considerable expansion of both the amount of assistance and the number of providers, which should include non-governmental organizations.

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With all humanitarian assistance to North Korea, the U.S. government should work to ensure that the delivery of such aid is adequately monitored. Monitors should be able to read, speak, and understand the Korean language. The United States should ensure that delivery of U.S. and other foreign aid is not misrepresented by the North Korean government through false claims that the aid is being provided by that government.

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The U.S. government should develop and support ways to provide information to the people of North Korea, including Voice of America and Radio Free Asia broadcasts, channels of people-to-people exchange, and other forms of contact with North Koreans, particularly on religious freedom and other human rights issues.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Felice D. Gaer
- Dean Michael K. Young

